

The Red-Gold Flower Teaches the Bird True Power

Loss

walked Iolish lands in the year following the death
of Malach, this gaunt visitor came to each home
with wrong-gifts of death and hunger which
5 the Iolish had forgotten in the stewardship
of the High Teloch, for often in days of waxing
bounty, men forget the meanness which was their
only possession for the good brought to them,
and at the turning of the tides he discovers how
10 much he will lose and by tooth and claw battles
to hold what he was given as though he had made
it himself, abandoning his nobility to hold on to all
he held; such was the spirit which fell upon Ioland.

The Hunter,

15 born anew as he stole the people of Helm Hailas
by the dark knowledge of the charlatans whose
souls he held on the cursed spot on his heart,
renewed his search for the ring, and though long
he scoured the forest he saw not the glinting
20 of gold, for the ring had already been found.

It was the man Eoin,
exiled from his Tella, the Ui Arden, for stealing
from the family of his uncle, who took
his exile in the forest beneath the Ail Meloch
25 and there found the ring, and knew it to be
the Boon of Malach as he had stood
in the Hall of Hala at the wedding of Malach
and Niola. The ring in hand, he felt his fortune
turning as the tides and the waxing of his power,
30 and the far-off dream of revenge against his uncle
and his ally, the son of the Teloch who was named
Molraed, seemed not distant. He left the forest
and went in search of a warband with which
to conquer the isle, as he thought that the ring
35 made him High Teloch, forgetting the words laid
upon the ring, but having no gold to buy the loyalty
of warriors, he began to go to Aglach Salam,
the Lulled Water and to the city which stood
on its banks. First he went the Hill of Hala,
40 the ruined Hall of Malach, far from eyes which
could spy him, cloaked in fog. The Iolish thought
a curse lay heavy on that land, brought by the rage

of the Ui Lide Aesal and all feared there to tread.
Though he feared specters and wraiths in the mist,
45 Eoin entered the barrow downs, holding before him
the Ring of Malach to claim the favor of that king.

He trembled as he went
to the Hill of Hala and saw about the great hill
the many barrows set by strange magic, struggling
50 in the fog not to tread upon the barrows which rose
suddenly, a great taboo it is among the Iolish
to stand upon a grave howe. Twisted faces he saw
in the mists, wracked in pain, and Eoin clutched
the ring on his finger. A strange power lingered
55 upon the mounds. Slowly he climbed the gentle
sides of Hala and stood where before the threshold
of the hall had stood, though there remained
no trace of its splendor, and addressed the mist field
not knowing which barrow belonged to Malach,

60 “Malach,
the grave humiliation of the greatest of all the Iolish
has been redressed by a gracious people unknown;
they in their kindness have given proper funeral
rights to the most just of men and king of a Tella
65 of warriors mighty, their labor given in recognition
of your singular place in our history. Watch over
them, and guide them who have done you kindness,
heal the bleeding heart of your kingdom.

“I have in my hand
70 that great boon which drove the simple to envy,
named Dain Thar Duin, the Ring of Good Fortune,
which was to be the everlasting heirloom
of the Ui Lide Aesal and the Hall of Hala, but they
have come to ruin in the embers of betrayal. Those
75 who stole from the hand which ruled have perished,
greed breeds greed, a thief must ever guard against
thieves; the cruel Mebeb was killed by her
charlatans, those who live by the light of false
wisdom are themselves made false, and he in turn
80 slain. I, driven from the Ui Arden, my people,
by those covetous of my position and spiteful
of my talent and through means most treacherously
conceived, found your boon in the forest where

I had taken refuge and knew it by its devices
85 and by your grace, for I have stood here before
in the Hill of Hala. I knew your will that the Ring
be put to work for the good of the Iolish, for since
your dying the people of Ioland have grown violent
and mistrustful. I am no great hero king, but I shall
90 be through your guidance and with the ring,
you shall forge me to rule in your stead and I shall
be given gold and silver tribute from all peoples
and have the most beautiful women for my own;
if there is any worthy of leading your people better
95 than I, present them now before me and I will give
to them this boon.”

Confident that there stood
no one around Hala and that he was alone
in the barrow mists which all feared to tread
100 for the anger of the Ui Lide Aesal, he prepared to
leave. Yet as he turned, the mists began to roll up as
if blown away by a storm, though the wind
remained calm. Below the Hill of Halal stood two
barrows larger than all others, and a child slept upon
105 the right most, sunlight in her golden hair shining as
the stars of night, flowers bloomed beneath her in a
bed of wild petals to comfort her, the powerful scent
of a thousand flowers reached Eoin. Terror struck
him, so wrong this child seemed to lay dreaming
110 upon the barrows, disturbing the wraith dwelling
in a mound so large, yet natural she seemed there,
that a hundred storms might assault the land but she
would be unmoved.

He fled the Hill of Hala,
115 daring not to look back, and in his haste he took not
the caution he once had, treading over the barrows
as the spirit of Malach seemed to reject him
and the mists began falling over the barrow tops,
a final betrayal against him by the Iolish. His exile
120 complete. He was left with naught, no people
and no name to safeguard him, only his wits
and the great ring of the High Teloch. Yet the ring
needed gold to breed gold, fortune to make fortunes,
neither of which he had in his possession but both

125 he could gain along the Lulled Water,
Aglach Salam.

It is the name of a river
which flows quietly through Ioland, sweet-water,
the Lulled Water takes no falls or rapids, fordable
130 in all its bends. A lake receives the river gracefully
in that same temperament in which the river flows,
and so the lake shares a name with the river.
It is in the south of the lake where the water rushes
forth to meet the sea, there earning a new name,
135 Aglach Ulmo. On the western shore of the lake
Aerellsalam lies, the Lulled Stone. The Iolish keep
to their families, each with its lands, and come
together to form tribes and many tribes make a
Tella, a great family of kin which holds their name.
140 In the Tella stand no cities, only villages, the largest
homes to Telochs; but Aerellsalam is separate from
all Tellas. It lies in the heart of Ioland, between
many Tella, where those who were made to live
in exile or outlawry come to build their homes.
145 In time the city prospered and those who sought
to sell their wares to other Tellas went there.
The city rules the nearby fields and its people eat
well. Many Telochs tried to take Aerellsalam,
but the walls repelled all hosts. They bowed
150 to Malach alone.

So the Ring came to Aerellsalam
in the hands of Eoin, he who was without friend
or coin; one gains the other, a friend gives coin
freely, and coin buys friends. He asked for coin
155 but no man gave unto him, none knew him
and thought him a thief; so he gave himself
to the blacksmith Crechan and served him in all
ways, but though Eoin was given plenty food
and a bed, his master would give him no coin.
160 Each day he labored he stood further from his
desire, each night he dreamed the seat of Malach
in the Hall of Hala burning before him, ash in his
hands.

He would sit in his own hall,
165 placed first among the Iolish and they would bring

him tribute as he desired, he would take cattle from
their fields and drink their mead, he would leave
his foes broken before his meadbench and take
the fairest of the isle for his own. These things
170 he desired, such that he saw them in the waking
day, yet he knew not how to take them. He went
to his master and offered to him the ring for a small
purse of coin and that very night he slew the smith
and all who slept under his roof, fleeing
175 with the gold of that house, the ring zealously kept
in his hand. Word of the violence was soon known
throughout Ioland and came to the ears
of the Hunter, who left in haste to Aerellsalam.

Ceallach awoke without Ilulean,
180 the loss of her made every breath a pain and cried
aloud her name through the forests and fields
as a wounded animal, a hound without his master.
Rage was Ceallach, for he feared that those who
had raped the Hall of Hala and the Peace of Malach
185 had killed the only heir of his body, again foe
succeeded only by his failing. Once he had been
Champion of Ioland, deliverer of Malach's justice
and bane his enemies; but foes walked the island
and Malach did not. Ceallach returned to the halls
190 of Malach to take his vengeance on those who had
burned that house, but he saw them not, finding
the many mounds which hallowed the dead,
and he was in awe. He understood not how they
came to be, for those who attack in the night
195 and against friends would not honor the dead
or give monument to their treachery. He stood upon
the great hill among the twisted timbers of the great
hall and gazed at the field of the dead, he knew not
who lay in them, any mound could house Malach
200 and Niola, so he spoke to each mound and wept,

“Malach, here at your threshold
stands a man who has thrice failed you and all
the people you shielded. Never has such shame
been laid on the shoulders of a man, and under
205 its weight I stumble. All Ioland will know my name
as he who failed his sworn lord and friend,
for as you welcomed to this land your child, I was

210 taken with drink and in my joy set no watch over
your lands so that no man stood guard at the doors
to your hall. It was I who permitted your house burn
to ash.

“But endless is my punishment
for failing the House of Malach which I swore
to uphold. Though from these horrors I saved
215 the child Ilulean, and far we fled from the hunting
hounds, I do not know now where the child is,
and I fear that Fate has chosen me for this final
humiliation, an everlasting death for the house
of my lord. I ran with her till she could not run,
220 then I carried her, for many miles though my legs
became the rock of the mountain I ran still, on still
as the lands grew wild and strange to me, till I fell
from exhaustion and sleep kept me for a full day
and night. But the Champion of the Iolish should
225 pay no mind to breathlessness, he must be
the strength of an entire people, knowing not fear,
wanting no sleep. I am not this champion, a warrior
of unending disgrace am I.

“Malach, hope tells me
230 that your house yet lives on, but fear whispers
otherwise. I would give my life to know that she
yet lives, I dread to learn that she has died, that they
have not covered her in a barrow that she may
dream eternal. Malach, this rules my mind, it holds
235 me so fiercely that I cannot rest until I know
of her fate. I know that some great good has come
to this hill of sorrow and gave you the funeral rites
worthy of your person, to this good I speak also,
let the tired warrior who has known but shame
240 be given purpose, if she yet lives let this warrior
know, for I have lived my whole life knowing
of my purpose, yet now it vanishes before my eyes.
Give your servant one last command so that he may
spend his life fulfilling your desires.”

245 The fog lifted with a single breath
and the Sun brought the grass to a flaming green,
and it seemed to Ceallach that he saw with eyes
unclouded at the wonder of day, he knew that

the land of the Iolish would live while the house
250 of Malach lived, and would die when it died.
Heartened, Ceallach left the Hall of Malach
and would not return, for the dead should be left
to their rest.

Ceallach went then to his people,
255 the Drocht Baalon, who lived in the far west of the
land, numerous and strong and loyal to their own
blood alone, where he had ruled once as Teloch.
It was their love for Ceallach which brought them
to Malach, they would follow their king though
260 he stood before the Gates of the Fiend. Ceallach
had left them, living in peace when he had come
to the house of Malach and there was little for his
people to fear under the hand of the High Teloch,
but now need was great for him to know of his
265 people's fortune after the Burning. In guise he went,
careful to seem no more than a beggar that none
would accost him, though his arm still had great
strength. He went slowly through the lands which
had paid tribute to the great king, desiring to see
270 the manner in which the Iolish suffered after
the breaking of the Peace. As he travelled it seemed
to him that every man sought to raise his position
above his neighbor and the memory of Malach lay
buried beneath Hala. Ceallach helped those who
275 he saw in need, easing the suffering of the land;
he would harness himself to the plow for those
whose livestock was taken, he gave freely
and safeguarded all but those who broke
the Peace of Malach, who were met with his
280 vengeance. Where he walked so too did Malach,
but Ceallach was one man, and around him the land
burned.

Many months it took Ceallach
to reach the Drocht Baalon, his people, as he stayed
285 with those who remembered Malach until they
had want for nothing. In this way he walked home,
and reaching the borders of his people found
the land in flame, the Un Londar with their kin,
the Un Londar Norna, raped the land as they learned
290 of Malach's death. The Drocht Baalon fought

to save their peoples, not their land, and were holed
up in the great keep of that people, Ail Baalon,
about which was set the wall of stone, alone
in all Ioland, which Baalon himself made to hide
295 his people from the Beast of the Sea. Ceallach
walked his land as a thunderstorm, he killed any
man who was not his own until he came to his seat,
that which he had not seen since he made his claim
for High-Teloch but so long had he been away that
300 the guards who met him knew him not and gave
him challenge.

“Halt beggar
and know that before you is the great seat
of the Sons of Baalon, this hall his mountain.
305 This hall will have none but the sons of that blood,
if you be not of her children then we will deny you
this hearth, this land is ours and belongs to no
others but those whose blood has tilled this land
since it rose from the water. Since the death
310 of our Teloch and the Malach above him these lands
have known great pain from the hands of bandits,
we have placed Sheamus Goodbrother as Teloch
and he has closed our land. If your blood is from
another people then leave this land to her own,
315 but if you are from the Un Londar families then
your life is forfeit.”

Ceallach loomed over them
unafraid, his strength waxing in his own land,
his muscles became young, knowing no limit
320 to himself, Ceallach was in his full power.
He heeded them not and threw the men
from his path, lifting the great gate to his kingdom
with one hand. The stone hall of the Sons of Baalon
was in uproar at his approach, a half-formed shield
325 wall guarded the seat where before Ceallach sat
from him, bristling as a hedgehog at the mighty
transgressor. Teloch Sheamus Goodbrother called
to Ceallach from his seat and issued him challenge
again,

330 “Might you must have,
to open by your arms alone what takes a team

of oxen to move. This strength has betrayed you.
Now you stand before the Maw of the Olipheist,
Demon of the Sea slain by our ancestor, the seat
335 of the Drocht Baalon, you will be fed to it for such
grave arrogance. Might though you have, you have
no weapon and each of us is armed with spear
and sword. Honor dictates that we arm you,
but so does she say that one must respect the home
340 of all men, friend and foe. So, home-breaker,
we shall give you the rights of thieves and not those
belonging to warriors, no mound will cover you.
Give your name that we might have the pleasure
of cursing you as we drink our mead.”

345 Ceallach gave quick response,
weeping to find his home hurting so and in speaking
he sought to ease their pain,

“Ceallach, son of Cole am I,
long have I walked to return before the sacred
350 Seat of Baalon. Much pain have I seen in the land
as Ioland itself weeps for the death of Malach.
I blame not your failure to remember me, these past
days have weighed heavier than all others
on our shoulders, old age has come for me in these
355 hard days. Five years I lived in the Hall of Hala
and one year have I wandered the land in search,
those five years I remained in my same appearance
in joyful youth but these last days have aged me
more than the counted years, I have known little
360 but despair these many days. I have walked the land
of my brother and remembered only his great
kindness, for he brought all our people, the many
Tella, to five years of peace, more than they have
ever known.

365 “Sheamus Goodbrother rules you not,
for fear is you Teloch. It is he who rules our people
and lands; great is his reign, powerful his arm.
You cannot conquer this ill-ruler until you master
yourself. You are wise to hide from him thus far,
370 for if the host of the Drocht Baalon charged forth
to retake the fields which have for all time belonged
to them, they would be no more than the lamb given

to the stew. The might of our Tella has died.
I blame no man for this dying, each of you
375 surrendered to your new king your arms, fleeing
as black words reached you that the High Teloch
was slain.

“Curse for all time these words,
that the death of our Malach should ever be
380 spoken by mortal men is the most cruel of fates.
Curse all drink, mead has made me Oathbreaker
and Friend-Slayer, unworthy of my own blood.
I, who could have fought all hosts of Ioland
with but a sword and the faith of my Lord,
385 lay besotted in a cot as Hala was raped around me.
I will touch no drink the rest of my days. Curse
the name of Ceallach, who failed his master,
who could not raise a barrow over his Teloch
as his duty commands, for others have done his duty
390 before him, he will have no rest and no home until
he is revenged.

“These curses I lay
as freely as now dead oaths which I have sworn,
by these I will abide. Men of the Drocht Baalon,
395 I may no longer be your Teloch, for shamed though
you are I am more so and unfit to led men. Sheamus
Goodbrother will not lead you to reclaim your lands
unless you reclaim your bravery and become
the mighty Drocht Baalon again. Hold this land
400 and ensure that the earth remembers Malach.
I will go from this land, my home, for the child
Ilulean yet lives and I will discover her.
She is hidden I know not where, but I shall find her
and bring her to safety. I will bring her here and you
405 will secure a home for her, she will not live as a rat,
but the heir of Malach, and we will return Ioland
to that noble house of Peace. To our tasks then,
and fear no pain. Take back your fields while I go
about my journey, in days of labor, however many,
410 we will return to the days of brotherhood so long
lost.

“Brothers, I now leave this hall,
my home, for all time, until I catch the elusive hind

and have Ilulean safe. My hunt will end victorious,
415 I am sure of it though the years be many, they will
be short for the single devotion to my task. So too
must you steel yourselves and joyfully set to these
labors. For Ioland.”

Not stopping to drink
420 from the well, Ceallach left the hall, though his
Tella pressed about him and begged him to remain,
for fear had fallen from their eyes and they
remembered him and the great days they had known
425 under his rule. They desired him to lead them once
more, to delay the hunt for Ilulean until they had
their homes again but Ceallach rebuked them
and told them that if they would not gain their farms
themselves, he would not return to them. Chastened
and ashamed, they vowed to take back their land
430 and to never permit anyone but the true king come
there under arms.

He went then to the lands
of the Helm Hailas, knowing them to be the raiders
who burnt the timbers of Ioland to ash, and would
435 revenge himself on them, but when he came there
he found them to be withered and rotting,
dark magic stole their being and left behind their
husks. Revulsion seized him and he wondered what
great evil could slay the soul and not the body.
440 Ceallach searched the many dead but found Ilulean
not. Knowing the story of her blood, Ceallach
feared that some dark song of the Baíth had brought
about this dark end. Darkness breeds darkness
and fens cannot drain. He left that place of death
445 and went west seeking some word of her.

The Hunter came to Aerellsalam,
eager for word of the thief who slew under the law
of bread. He was not yet in his full might
and cruelty and entered the city in quiet guise.
450 Many knew the name and power of Reych, hearing
the ruin of the House of Malach, their enmity
for this crime was great. A year had passed since
the Burning of Hala and high summer came, in
other years a time of great plenty for all the island,

455 but the Year of Mourning one of violence and fear.
Few sowed their fields, hoping to reap that of their
neighbor, and those who had saw their fields burn
before the harvest. It was for this reason that Noriín
of the Un Salal came to the city of Aerellsalam
460 in desperate search for food, for upon hearing
the word of Malach's death the Un Salal made war
with their neighbors, leaving their fields fallow,
but though they fought many terrible battles with
those they had once led in the great host, they never
465 once returned in victory. Their Tella had no grains
in stockpile and the Teloch sent his son to the city
in the hope of food, for none of their neighbors
would give to them. Noriín quickly met the Hunter,
and they became fast friends by the greed which
470 dwelled in their hearts, their friendship made
undying.

For the first days,
the Hunter under guise walked the city as a beggar
in need and the people of Aerellsalam were kind
475 and giving to the Hunter, for they knew not who
he was. He had only once passed through the city
as one of the Helm Hailas warriors made
by obligation to battle for Malach, but Malach had
kept his men disciplined and he had not a chance
480 of seeing the city in detail. In all the war which took
the lands around them Aerellsalam was not harmed,
saved by its great walls, and in all the battling
and uncertainty, the city was the only in which Tella
could find the grain needed for the winter. In this
485 wealth Aerellsalam had much to give and gained
gold in excess of its goods. In time the Hunter came
to know the deeds of the murder of the blacksmith
and the name of he who had so readily committed
to this treachery.

490 Yet he knew not where
the man Eoin had fled to. To this end he sought
the great men who governed the city, that they
might give to him all knowledge they had
of the man. Noriín also was at the hall of these great
495 men seeking the grain they held within their walls.
The Hunter in guise spoke to them,

“As the land about succumbs
to the horror of violence so soon after the Peace
which lived in all the land, you live in that peace
500 still. As the true Teloch of all Ioland was slain
in her bed the peace they brought us flamed
and you prospered. They who come to Aerellsalam
without coin or goods are made to live meagerly
while they place more upon your table. They seek
505 not dyed cloth or jewels, but bread, which for their
need you have made more expensive than gold. You
take from them eagerly, caring not if you hold their
last coin, profit for the sake of prestige. For how
does one sit at this hall if they possess no trader’s
510 skill, certainly not by wise warrior’s blood as
governs the rest of this land.

“Yet in all this prosperity
you have earned by the death of your master there
remains a blight and stain you cannot clean with
515 your gold. The cursed man Eoin, who is in every
way evil that his own people have placed him
in exile for his crimes and hold him to be dead,
found refuge in your city. Blood does not protect
this man for his crime was against the law of blood.
520 Now he defies the law of man by slaying those who
had protected him. How these wise fathers came
to permit a man of such bestial nature to enter their
great home is a worrying question and the people
will naturally come to wonder at this misstep
525 of their wisest brothers. They will realize this all
the sooner should the knowledge and power of these
preeminent men fail to assist my quest.

“So give to me all word
of where he has fled, that I might in haste ride there
530 and take what he has stolen from the rightful Teloch
of the land. She who wore it before she was
betrayed and slain. Give to me that which I am
owed and you in return will have naught to fear.”

Norín listened to the Hunter
535 and when he finished followed him in speech,
seeking to bow the men of Aerellsalam further,

“Here stands one who
has seen the unjust practice with which this hall
has treated the people of Ioland. Do they forget that
540 before them sits Norín, son of the Teloch
of the West who was appointed to battle the power
of the vile tyrant Malach, who would have but
for the treachery of Ceallach have stood as the
single master of this land? It is I who by right would
545 have married Niola, only by our union would rise
not daughters but sons. The Un Salal would not
have died as cowards before the night attackers,
our Teloch would not surrender to death so easily
as Malach.

550 “Now we have come to you,
you who have become rich from the misery
of others and your own fearfulness. Brave Iolish
build no wall, for by their own hand are delivered
from danger, but about you stands a wall, not built
555 for brave deeds. How pitiful are the Iolish that those
who possess the most treasure are not the strongest
of warriors. How shameful that those who know
safety are not bound by bonds of blood but are
exiles from decent Tella, rejects from their own
560 blood.

“I have come to this house
to feed my people beset upon by foes at all sides,
for when Malach died he took his peace with him,
yet I am refused the food needed for the winter
565 for want of treasure. Should this food be refused
us once more, I shall begin to walk your streets
and rouse the people against you for permitting
the man Eoin to enter into your city and bring ruin
to so many. The demands of the Un Salal are just
570 and will be seen to by this council, else war eternal
between your people and mine.”

Norín, though once clever
in word and deed, had fought many battles
in the wars he began and had forgotten how
575 to speak to men far from the fields of contest.
The men of Aerellsalam were unafraid of all his

words, for they knew the position of the Un Salal
and could match them in the field. They spoke,

“Not only have the fields
580 of the Iolish burned in these long days of the sword
but also their courtesy. Freely and without
reservation have we permitted into this city those
who seek respite from the war traitors have made,
in what way have we harmed them? If it is a sin
585 to refrain from slaying our kin, then we are most
guilty sinners. It is a mark against our records that
the man Eoin was permitted into this city,
but it seems that we have not learned our lesson,
since in chasing away a viper from our home two
590 more have slipped through the doors.

“To the first viper
we say this, no mighty man are you to threaten
those who opened their home for you and listened
your entreaties. Much would we have given you
595 to feed your own for the coming months,
but the great piles which you demand could feed
many others, had you the coin we would give all
that you sought. Yet now we will give naught
to you who threaten us in our home. Look about
600 you and see that we have about us arms and that
you have surrendered yours. Guest right applies
not to those who would burn down the home
of the host. Remember that it is not from the might
of others that you starve but your own folly, you
605 failed to sow your fields and sought from your rival
not your own hand. We did not pluck the seeds
from your fields. You did not sow and cannot reap.
Starve for your insolence.

“The second viper is to us
610 a stranger and better at favor-seeking. We will give
you what you seek on one solemn vow, that when
we have given you what all we know of the man
you will leave from Aerellsalam and return no
more, never raising arms against the people of this
615 place. And should the weasel Noríin ever raise his
voice against us, that you kill him.”

The Hunter did not wish
to place himself under more oaths than he already
carried, if the ring came again to Aerellsalam then
620 he would be unable to take it, but he placed his oath
to the Queen Mebeb above all other things in life,
and so made this promise readily, unafraid to break
it. Sated by their ignorance of his will, the council
of the wise told all they knew of the man Eoin.

625 In his flight from Aerellsalam,
Eoin went to the lands to the south, which belong
to the Un Colta bar, and came to the home
of Galian, a shepherd of little wealth and rich
honesty. But afterwards, they knew naught of his
630 journey and all knowledge of Eoin ends. The agents
of Aerellsalam who sought to bring the man before
the judges found no word of him.

It was not through the failure
of the agents that no word of Eoin reached the city,
635 but rather the wickedness of the wife of Galian.
She learned of the wealth Eoin brought with him,
that which he gained through slaughter and more
than she had seen in the coffers of her husband,
and she lay with him, but when Eoin would not flee
640 with her and would leave her to her squalor,
she told her husband that he had forced himself
on her. Galian slew Eoin for his crime and gave him
no burial.

The Ring thus became his
645 and Galian found that he wanted not more.
Each ewe lambled and none knew sickness,
they feared no wolves. With such a flock and more
than he had want to guide, he sold a number of this
new flock and received gold more than their worth.
650 When Galian reached to his purse from then after,
he found no end to his coin. His wife, who had long
been shrewish, was now affectionate, and had no
more needs. The Ring gave him in such short time
that which he had never had in long years, and for
655 his righteousness it gave him great things, for
Galian knew not of the lie that gave him the ring.
But Galian was not of Malach's blood, and the

curses set upon the twisted gold would soon see him dead.

660 Galian became famed,
and he lived in the lands of the Un Colta Bar,
ruled by the great Teloch Aetheldor Heldor, called
the Hawk King of Cotlrada. This king joined
in the host which battled Malach, but in defeat
665 Malach spared him and made a friend of him,
so that in the five years of his rule, Malach had him
as the guardian of all southern lands to keep watch
on those Tella Malach thought would rise against
him. Never did he have to raise arms against
670 the Iolish in this time, but he maintained his
warband and kept this host fresh. When the black
words came to him the Malach was slain
by treachery, Aetheldor sent forth his army
and seized all lands west of the river Agalach Ulmo
675 and south of the hills of Ail Bolam. He knew all
which passed in Ioland and could send his host
to meet any threat before it reached his borders;
for these reasons was he known as the Hawk King.

 King Aetheldor sent for Galian
680 a number of times in his rise, first to ensure he
was no thief and later to praise him and feast on his
mutton. King Aetheldor would only feast if Galian
came with fifteen lambs. Few Telochs in the years
after Malach could ask tribute of their people,
685 for they had little and the Telochs were away
fighting in other lands. Aetheldor could ask them,
since his warband held their borders unchallenged
and a shade of the Peace lived still. From his friend
Galian he demanded little in gold, as he took much
690 in lamb. As the agents went out to collect tribute,
Galian learned the truth from his wife. Either
in wine laden humor or a rare argument, she told
him of her sin, that she had lay with Eoin freely,
but that he would not flee with her. Galian, ashamed
695 that he had slain an innocent man in his home,
and to find his wife such a snake worried about how
next to act. When the agent Aelthras came
and asked for his payment. Galian gave the ring,
the last of Eoin's gold which was still in his home,

700 and told the man of his sins. Galian demanded that
Aetheldor judge him and his wife. The agent
promised to learn the Teloch's judgement on
the case and asked that Galian take no action until
the Aetheldor gave his sentence.

705 Galian would not learn
Aetheldor's verdict, for soon after the Hunter came
to that home with Noríín and demanded the ring
for his life. Galian could not give it and so he
and his wife were slain, their home burned
710 and flocks driven away. It was there before
the burning house of Galian that Noríín
and the Hunter renewed their pact of friendship,
that the Hunter would receive the ring and the title
of High Teloch while Noríín could ask for three
715 boons which the Hunter could not refuse. They set
off in pursuit of the agent and the ring.

Away, in the east,
among the barrows which surrounded
the Hill of Hala walked a man by the name
720 of Threasash of Ui Dubshallain, a small clan among
the Ui Arden of north Ioland. He walked the many
graves with sadness, feeling the pain of the peoples
buried there. Threasash was an Iolish singer,
and in Iolish songs there is power. He was a singer
725 beyond all others of all time, and for his voice
called the Sparrow. He had come to sing to them a
song of easing, to give them rest eternal and drive
vengeance from their souls. As he walked through
the mists of the sorrowful land he saw faces
730 swirling there, but he was calm, for he mourned
the faces and did not fear them. Sitting upon
the tired Hill of Hala, he saw below him the outlines
of the barrows hidden in the fog, and he sang
to the spirits of the dead age. But he did not finish
735 his song, for he flew into a rage at what was a most
disrespectful sight. Upon one of the largest mounds
before Hala, a child danced to his song and picked
the flowers which grew there. He shouted
to the child, enraged by her presence, his song not
740 meant for mortal ears, and said to her,

“Child most foolish,
know you not where you stand, care you not
for the great sorrowful dignity of these barrows.
I am Threasash, famed singer, though this name
745 is not known, all know the repute of the Sparrow,
whose song is more powerful than that of birds,
whose voice is sweeter than their warbles. Child,
no person should dance upon the barrows
of the dead, and should you be buried in as great
750 a mound as his who you humiliate, your spirit
would be ashamed should someone come to pick
the grave-flowers.

“He that is your father
must be shamed for your action and cursed
755 throughout the land. How unsuited for fatherhood
this fool is for his negligence. He should have
scolded you for entering this sacred place. Only I,
who have come here to sooth the king of old,
can walk among these mounds because of my noble
760 purpose. And I danced not upon their graves but
walked with somber care. Child, leave the mound
and tell your father that he is a fool for granting
you to walk so freely.”

The child on the mound
765 ceased her dance and listened to the Sparrow
as he spoke, taking notice of each word as flowers
seemed to leap from the earth and bloom about her,
and she replied,

“He which made me was a fool,
770 for he believed that they who had been once
counted as friend and ally would not betray
his friendship and in his joy forgot that men are men
and can only love those beneath him. If you seek
the man to chastise, he is below my feet
775 and the song you offer him cannot give him
more peace than he has already. You command me
to leave this sacred burial, but Sparrow I cannot,
for my great mother does not permit my leaving.
The dirt of this grave is the border of my home here,
780 and I may only see the sky from this mound, though
my home goes on far beneath the soil.

“I am sorry if I have disturbed
your song. You sing with grace and true power,
a kind I have known no mortal man sing. But your
785 claim to sing sweet as a sparrow with the sorrow
of the flying race is to me untrue, their songs
to me remind me of my mother, who lives now
in the barrow beside my father. In your song I could
not see her face, but I can when birds sing to me.
790 All I could see was a man seeking praise.
The power of your voice was a wonder to behold,
my great mother tells that true power is rare in men.
For all this time, from the Burning of the hall where
you sit, I have learned the true power in this land.
795 Little do I know but more I shall learn and soon
I will be given all knowledge, then I will be
permitted to leave these sad hills. I am told that
a special purpose is given to me, one which will
save my great-mother’s people. I hear from you
800 some of that power which my great-mother has,
and though that power is pale in comparison
to the winged race I would much like to hear more,
for though I have lost much, I endeavor to be kind,
and to give the race of man my love as those who
805 harmed me would not. Your voice is a gift,
and if a sparrow you claim to be, then a sparrow
you are. I can teach you true magic, but for this
I ask a gift, a vow, and your friendship. Your gift
is to be the end of your song, the vow you must
810 swear is a promise to only sing your songs
for the righteous, your friendship will be mine
eternal and you will not harm that which is mine
as I shall not harm that which is yours.”

The Sparrow was awed
815 by the strange child but wary of such a creature,
for clearly she was one of the Baíth who mortal man
never escape unchanged. The Sparrow was well
learned in each story of their race and knew of
the bargains they made. Only Math was unchanged
820 by his contact of the Baíth, and that only by his own
great knowledge of power; he had little humility
for his own power but knew that Math was the most
powerful of mortal men. Fearing of her power
and the Baíth as men ought, he knew too that she

825 would not freely let him pass. So he warily swore
to her the oaths.

Soon after he came
to the lands of the Un Colta bar, though of the days
between he does not tell. The lands of the Hawk
830 King, being vast, were divided by the deep river
Aglach Idom, over which there is but one bridge
where the toll is set high. Far from there, the river
takes a meandrous bend and is fordable. Here was
set a brigand who named himself the River Otter.
835 His toll for the ford was less than what the King
had set over the bridge, and he aided those who paid
in the crossing. The armies of the Un Colta Bar had
seized the ford to gain more wealth and had placed
a prize for the Otter's life, but they had not
840 managed to find him. The men earned the enmity
of those around for the high price on the crossing
and so the Otter drove them off with their aid.
No matter how many times the Teloch sent his
warband, they would be driven off by him; never
845 did they rule the ford for more than a fortnight.
It was when the Otter ruled the ford when
the Sparrow, searching for a patron, came
to the waters, and the agent Aelthras ran to his
master and the Hunter after him.

850 The Sparrow had no coin
with which to cross at either the bridge or the ford.
He sang to the Otter a song of sweetness to let him
pass, yet the Otter was a simple but quick-witted
man, not listening to the weave of power laid
855 in the words. The Sparrow needed the Hawk King
to feed him and give him bedding, and so he spoke
to the Otter,

"I see in your eyes
lies none of the wisdom which I have sung to you,
860 my words have floated sweetly by your ears
as a butterfly and vanished in the flowers of these
summer days. But think what little there is to be had
from my denial, you cannot from me gain coin,
for I have none, and there will be no one to sing
865 your praise if you attack this singer. Indeed,

if I am refused, then in all songs I sing from this day
and after I shall name you oaf, and all Ioland will
mock you until the isle falls back into the sea.
You cannot rob me of my instrument for my voice
870 is tied to this body.

“Nothing is to be had
from your refusal of me but much gained through
my friendship. For if by your charity I come
to the hall of the Un Colta Bar then your praise
875 I will sing to the people there, and by the sweetness
of my voice I shall deliver to you this ford for all
times. Think of the merits of my friendship
and wonderous wealth which will be yours. Only
remember that it was your kindness in permitting
880 my passing and my honor which brought all that
you might seek.”

The Otter stood unmoved
in the river and replied in his short manner,

“What use is a Sparrow
885 to the River Otter, he cares not for its song,
his business more valuable to him. Far better it is
to swim and fish than sing. What is a home to a bird
who changes trees with the winds. The river is the
home of the Otter. He does not change his home
890 and in the snows of winter he does not fly south.
So the Sparrow with his fine song is unable to sway
those who must live in the river, though his
plumage is a fine regalia.

“This Sparrow offers the protection
895 from the hawk who he will charm with his song,
but the otter has seen this hawk before and chased
him from his home when they thought to take it.
May they come a hundred times and I will wait
for them in the deep water and retake this place
900 once more from those who claim kingship over
the water. Fly Sparrow, and let them know that
so long as there is water beneath me I cannot
be defeated, and I will ferry across all who can
pay.”

905 Thus, in this manner they continued,
and through the day gave argument and counter
argument until the chariot of the sun began his
gallop to the horizon and rest, at this time Aelthras
came to them, exhausted from his journey, in a run
910 he had come from the house of Galian, eager
to deliver to the Teloch the case of the shepherd.
Knowing full well the toll of the Otter he paid
and moved to cross the river, but the Sparrow
accosted him.

915 “Good man who gives gold
so freely and kindly, little caring if gold should fall
to the hands of brigands wrongly thieving from
good men. Let no man say that you hoard your coin
for your own, here is truly a king of men. All men
920 are to you friends for who might hold enmity for
one who is so generous. Men are not of the kind
to hate a purse which sees not the filth of their
hearts but feeds them freely. Surely no man
of the Iolish is of the kind to hate such a man,
925 banditry and brigandry is the work of all men of this
island now that the Teloch above Telochs is dead.
There are those who are not of such grand heart
who still plague this land and to whom you are
hateful. To cross this river is to walk into the hall
930 of such a man. He is the Hawk King Aetheldor
and his lands lay about you. Many times has he
fought this brigand to remove him from this river,
and many times has this snake been removed by his
true lord and master that his people might use this
935 ford unmolested. Though many times driven from
here in cowardly defeat, he does yet live in
opposition to his king. Dangerous it is for such
a man who does so freely give to his enemies
to enter his lands having bought their friendship.
940 I do merely warn you that such a Teloch as he
would not forgive so quickly that you have paid
those who resist him. There are but three of us here
and should the tongue of this Otter slip then your
purse may well be in danger. Brigands are not
945 famed for their loyalties and temperance, drink may
yet loosen a flapping tongue. But if you gave to him
the cost of a second passage, then in all ways he

will look upon you as a patron and keep your
secrets as long as you live. Since paying this toll
950 should not then go to waste, perhaps I too may
cross, and by my skill of song harbor you from any
word of your misdeeds being spoken in that fair
court. You have given freely to this bandit and it is
now time for you to gain my friendship by
955 permitting my crossing. I shall be in your debt
and sing high praise of you, guarding you from
the wrath of any host.”

Aelthras listened to the Sparrow,
and spoke to him in rebuke,

960 “I am no good man who gives
freely to brigands who battle my master. I am
the agent of the King Aetheldor and have paid
the Otter from my own purse, leaving to the king
that which is his. I have little to fear of this man’s
965 tongue, though I know by the word of the land that
he is not given to drunkenness and would not sell
to any man the names of those who cross. Oft has
he fought my master, though unable to fight all men
sent to this place, they could not hold this ford from
970 him long after. This place belongs to the Otter until
the Hawk King again comes, and it will
belong to the king until the Otter returns to this
place. I have chosen this path as an expedient, for I
have with me news most dire which must reach
975 the ears of my Teloch as it is his duty to this land
to hear woes and pass judgement. Woe shall soon
burden him, for his favorite has come to his riches
by murder and theft, that he has feasted upon
the fruits of death in joyful engagements.
980 In my purse I hold the last of the cursed coin
which was taken in blood, a single ring, beautifully
cast, worth more in gold than the great flocks of he
who gave it in penance. Already I have spent too
long at this place, long still to travel until my king
985 hears this case. Delay me no longer, for I have
no more desire to waste these hours with mindless
talk.”

Further he went into the river,
the Otter guiding him through the waters
990 and the Sparrow watching from the shore in agony,
no pass was open to him, no lands safe for his art.
In the lands beyond the river, a powerful king yet
reigned and the land knew peace, where behind it
there was war and closer than they had believed,
995 for the warbringer pursuing the ring false-claimed
came to the river, and hearing the rebuff
of the Sparrow, he knew that which he sought
was within his grasp. He walked to the edge
of the waters, Noríín by his side and demanded
1000 the ring,

“That which you have is truly cursed.
For in blood was it cast, though long I thought
it was golden. This ring belonged to my love,
and she named me the only heir to all she owned.
1005 Stolen was that ring as was her soul by wicked
charlatans, and I pursued until in dark forests
I slew him that had harmed me, but the ring was
stolen by another who sold it to a benefactor
in bad faith and slew him. And so this villain came
1010 to Galian, who from the greed in his heart killed
him in slumber. I went to the home of Galian
and found it taken again from me and learning
his story, I slew him.

“Now the ring is yours
1015 and knowing the tale of the cursed ring, you must
give it to me by right. No longer does your journey
have an urgency, for justice has been given to him
who murdered. Give the ring and forget that you
seek a Teloch’s judgement. I have spared justice
1020 the need to weigh his soul. Far have I journeyed
for that ring and I will not have it denied me.
It is but a trinket, a token of dead love. Surrender it
and live long happy days.”

The Hunter and Noríín drew
1025 their weapons, and prepared to enter the river.
The Otter guided the agent to the banks on the other
side and turned back to face them,

“The bird chirps sweet songs
but poor counsel, the hound brays like a donkey
1030 for the false memory of his master. The bird
is better than the wrong-voice dog. A good hound
dies of starvation at the death of his master,
yet before the river stand two who have betrayed
their right duty. In delivering justice to the sheep,
1035 a new injustice was made. The agent of the Hawk
has paid in full the River Otter for safe passage
and he shall have what he paid for. He will not be
accosted by beggars or traitors, nor shall he be
burdened by poor verse. The Otter has this vowed.
1040 He will not be robbed or harmed, not by the river
and not by blackhearts. You cannot cross this river.”

Battle was joined with a rush,
the Hunter and Noriín with swords of well-forged
iron, taken from the burned hall of kings,
1045 in the hands of the Otter but a long stick to find
footing in changing waters. Powerful beasts seethed
into the waters and the Otter met them. They were
more skilled in war, but the Otter was surefooted,
and knew every rock of his ford, as a goat in high
1050 mountains, where they would stumble he would
not and struck them hard with his staff so swift
it they could not see it. Their rage betrayed
them to the mud, but still the battle went against
him. They sought to cross the river and take the
1055 ring, and while the Otter battled one, the other
would move for the other bank. As they crossed,
he unleashed a flurry of blows to stun his foe
and went to face the other. In this way they crossed
into the middle of the ford, the Otter tripping
1060 and stalling as long as his strength held, his honor
demanding the agent deliver to the Teloch,
but the cursed power of the Hunter was burning
rage, boiling the Otter’s ford. Slowly, he was driven
ever back, desperate in delay, he had not
1065 the stamina of the Hunter. The Sparrow,
seeing the Otter flagging and the mad curse upon
the Hunter, began to sing a song of staying,
of resting vigilance and unwavering will, and as he
sang the Otter was emboldened and began pushing
1070 them cleverly using his stick to herd them back

to the far bank. But when his feet stood once more
on earth they overpowered him, for he could
no longer trip them with unseen rocks, and the Otter
would have perished had not Ceallach come at that
time.

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He had long followed rumor
of the Hunter, and in coming to Aglach Salam
learned of his movements and pursued him.
At the home of Galian he found his ruin and went
therefore to speak with the great Teloch of that land.
He knew little of these lands and hastened along
the quickest route to the lands of Aetholdor.
Meeting the river, he turned to seek a ford. In such
manner he came upon the battle, and knowing
the Hunter from the great War of Malach
and the Burning of Hala, set upon them.

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In joining the battle,
he pulled the Otter free and let him rest while
he fought. He was still the Sword of Hala, a force
like a summer storm in war, quickly wounding
Noríín in the leg. Noríín could not stand
and crawled from that place to safety. The battle fell
to the Hunter and Ceallach alone; the Sparrow
unsure the new warrior or his aims gave him no
help from song, instead giving his melody
to the wounded Otter, ending his bleeding with
masterful song. Ceallach beat upon the Hunter,
swinging the sword Malach had given him, against
him the Hunter held the masterwork of Hala
and so they were matched. Great thunderous blows
fell upon each of them, and their shields were soon
broken at their feet. The Hunter had in him
hundreds of souls, each of them a strength
in his blood, but Ceallach was his equal, still
waxing in the power which belongs in mortal
bodies. Long they fought unable to wound the other,
until the Hunter placed his leg inside Ceallach's
and unbalanced him with a forceful push. Ceallach
would have been slain had he not grabbed the blade
of his foe, losing two fingers from his left hand.
He howled in pain, trees shuddering their leaves off
and boulders breaking at the sound. But he was still

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the Sword of Hala, and not defeated. Swiftly
he rose, regaining his footing, and delivering blows
1115 to the body of the Hunter, who in arrogance had
thought of final victory. The wounds the bone-hilted
sword gave left no mark, healing quickly
as the souls taken by the Hunter's curse took injury
for him as the song of the Sparrow had erased
1120 the wounds of the Otter.

Ceallach knew not of this,
and began to fear that his foe was no longer
of mortal kind, but his rage quelled his fear,
and he pressed on his attack, falling upon
1125 the Hunter renewed. Such skill was not known
to the Hunter, who began to retreat from the river.
Still Ceallach could deliver no blow which would
kill the beast before him. It was the Sparrow who
sang songs of power which raised Ceallach
1130 to victory, for having saved the Otter and seeing
the battle between the two powerful warriors,
he sought to end the Hunter by his song. Ceallach
felt strength enter him and with final stroke,
delivered the mortal blow to the Hunter, who fell
1135 from the great wound to his head, for he wore
no helm in battle. A black ichor pooled
from the wound.

Ceallach, satisfied in his victory,
left the field and went to the Sparrow and Otter,
1140 there seeking to offer thanks to his allies. The Otter
could not walk from exhaustion, though all his
wounds were healed, and the Sparrow sought still
to cross the river. Ceallach bore the Otter
and guided the Sparrow across the river, taking
1145 great care not to fall. On the other bank stood
the agent, who had hidden in the trees when pursued
but now came forward, offering them places
in the hall of the Un Colta bar, and they went there.

On the other side of the bank,
1150 Norín stirred, his wounds were not mortal,
and he returned to the river to find the Hunter slain.
As he searched the body of the Hunter for treasure
he was given to shock, for the mortal wound which

Ceallach had delivered him had begun to heal.
1155 Afraid though he was, Noríin took the Hunter
from that place, and began to tend to his wounds,
awed by the power of the darkness.